

Ontario's deadly rattler is a protected species

John Power

LENGTH: Medium (300 - 700)

SUBJECT: OUTDOORS

Most folks steer clear of snakes, but the reverse isn't necessarily the case when the shoe is on the other foot. The wrong foot. The one serpents got off on in the Garden of Eden.

While the majority of Ontario snakes are harmless and even beneficial to a degree, an inordinately high percentage of the population has serpent-phobia, loathing and even fearing those reptiles.

Excepting a single species, such fears are unfounded. The exception is the Massasauga rattler, the province's only venomous snake.

It's most common on the Bruce Peninsula, around Georgian Bay and for some miles inland. Lake St. Clair and Lake Erie also are listed as rattlesnake territory.

The Massasauga has dull gray and brown coloration and, as snakes go, a stocky physique, rarely stretching more than 30 inches in length.

It's a pit viper, thus labelled because of pits between eyes and nostrils containing a sensory gland that can detect heat and thus, a potential victim.

The fangs are hollow, like hypodermic needles, and are folded along the roof of the mouth when not in use. The venom is produced by the salivary glands.

A rattlesnake bite can be toxic to humans, although you can count the number of relatively recent Ontario fatalities on the fingers of one hand and still have a couple of spares.

Those who have been bitten and recovered, with or without medical attention, is another matter.

Yet, despite the fact the Massasauga is a potential killer, it's protected by law. If convicted of harming one, you could receive a hefty fine and even a jail term.

George Pinchin, a 77-year-old resident of the Severn Bridge area, is one who thinks this law is an ass.

He exclaims: 'It's sheer lunacy to protect something that could be the death of you or your family! In rattlesnake country, man is the endangered species.'

Pinchin is biased, but with good reason. He nearly cashed in his chips two years ago after being bitten near his cottage, located between Parry Sound and Sudbury.

"I was picking blueberries with my grandson when a rattler nailed me on a finger. No buzzing, no rattling, no warning of any kind.

"However, the swelling and pain were almost instantaneous. Up my hand and arm, into my shoulder and neck, then down my chest."

By the time he reached his cottage, Pinchin was dizzy and nauseous. Like so many others along that shore, Pinchin can't drive there from here. After being unable to raise a water taxi, a Sudbury Float plane service was called.

About 90 minutes later the plane landed in Sudbury, where Pinchin was transferred to a waiting ambulance and, to the sound of wailing siren, was whisked off to the local hospital, one of 28 in rattlesnake land that carries a supply of antivenin serum.

Unfortunately, that didn't help Pinchin, who explains: "The correct dosage of antivenin varies with individuals and is controlled or regulated by prednisone, to which I am extremely allergic."

Blood transfusions are the option and before Pinchin was discharged 10 days later, he had received 60 pints.

Pinchin's advice to others: "Clear away potential lairs in the vicinity of your cottage, watch where you walk, and perhaps buy a pig or mongoose.

"I won't say I'd kill 'em, because I can't afford the fine. But maybe I'd bite 'em back."

John Power is a freelance outdoors writer/consultant and member of a number of conservation organizations, including Ducks Unlimited, the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters and the Canadian Wildlife Federation. His column normally appears Wednesday and Saturday.

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